

VZCZCXRO4432

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RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHMR RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHSK #0886/01 2921616
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 191616Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6587
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCNOSC/OSCE COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000886

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - October 19, 2007

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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Civil Society

12. Polish Minority Leaders Arrested in Grodno

A district court in Grodno sentenced several local activists on obscenities charges on October 11. A judge sentenced the leader of the Union of Poles of Belarus (UPB) Angelika Borys, Chief Editor of the "Polish Magazine in Exile" Igor Bantser, and Belarusian National Front Grodno office head Nikolay Lemenovsky to a fine of 460,000 rubles (USD 215), and ten and five days in jail respectively. Authorities allowed only Borys' parents to attend the closed-door hearing.

13. Supreme Court Denies Leftist Union Registration

The Supreme Court refused to overturn the registration denial of the Union of Left Parties (ULP) at a hearing on October 11. With the earlier liquidation of the Women's Party Nadzeya and the suspension of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) in August, the ULP has lost legal grounds for registration. BPC representative Yelena Skrygan noted that the three parties would "continue their

cooperation within the pro-democratic camp."

14. Milinkevich Founds European Integration Council

Opposition Leader Aleksandr Milinkevich presided over the founding meeting of the European Integration Council (EIC) on October 10. Over 30 prominent political and civil society figures and experts joined the EIC and elected Milinkevich chairman. The EIC will serve as a consultative body and a forum for the discussion of strategies to increase integration and cooperation with Europe. Milinkevich stated the EIC would conduct information campaigns, provide training to opposition activists, and promote national culture.

15. Vandals Attack Jewish Cemetery in Bobruysk

Vandals damaged 15 graves at a Jewish cemetery in Bobruysk on October 12, overturning and smashing gravestones and leaving human excrement. Local Jewish leaders filed a complaint with the police, who have launched an investigation.

16. Opposition Youth Demonstrate on Solidarity Day

On October 16, over 30 opposition youth held a joint prayer service in downtown Minsk to show support for political prisoners. Participants sang an unofficial anthem of Belarus, lit candles, and unfurled a sign urging the release of imprisoned youth leader Dmitry Dashkevich. Plainclothes officers filmed the demonstration, but made no arrests.

17. Youth Activist Expelled from University

The administration of the Belarus State Technological University has expelled "For Freedom" Movement activist Dmitry Podreza. Officials based the expulsion on alleged violations of internal university rules by Podreza, though others insist it is politically motivated.

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The activist said he may appeal the ruling or pursue a degree abroad.

International Relations

18. Israel Reacts to Luka's Anti-Semitic Remarks

Israel has lodged an official complaint against President Lukashenko's recent anti-Semitic remarks with a demarche to the Belarusian ambassador to Israel. According to "Komsomolskaya Pravda" Lukashenko described the city of Bobruysk, where Jewish graves have recently been desecrated, saying "If you visit Bobruysk, you can see what condition the town is in. It is frightful to enter. It is a pigsty. It is largely a Jewish town. Well, you know what attitude the Jews have towards the places they live. Look at Israel."

Domestic Economy

19. Lukashenko Defends Benefit Cuts

President Lukashenko justified recent social benefits cuts at a press conference on October 12, saying the move was necessary to stave off an increase in the retirement age. Lukashenko said the system needed revision as some of the benefits abolished date back to the Stalin era. He also announced unspecific plans to create new benefits for those in greatest need.

International Trade

10. Belarus Negotiating New Credit Lines

The Belarusian Ministry of Economics announced on October 16 that

Belarus is negotiating credit lines with India, Turkey and Czech Republic to finance future investment projects. Belarus plans to increase foreign investment to 15-20 percent of total investment by 2010. Last year the figure was USD 354 million, or 3.4 percent of total capital investment.

11. Gazprom: No Gas Price Renegotiation

Russia does not plan to renegotiate the conditions of natural gas and oil supplies to Belarus. Gazprom and Belarusian authorities have confirmed the pricing structure for natural gas for the next several years. In 2008, Belarus will pay 67 percent of the European gas price less transport costs, 80 percent in 2009, and 100 percent of the average European price starting in 2011. The Belarusian side planned to renegotiate the deal to moderate the price increase, and even drafted a 2008 budget based on hoped-for lower price hikes.

12. Quote of the Week

Pavel Nazdra, a member of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party, on being taken into custody by police immediately after a drunken man approached him on the street, waved his arms, and provoked a fight:

"At the police station, they told me that I had used obscenities and insulted passers-by.... The man who provoked me had been released from prison not long before.... I regard the incident as mere provocation and part of the police's preparations for the European March. It's their style."

Stewart